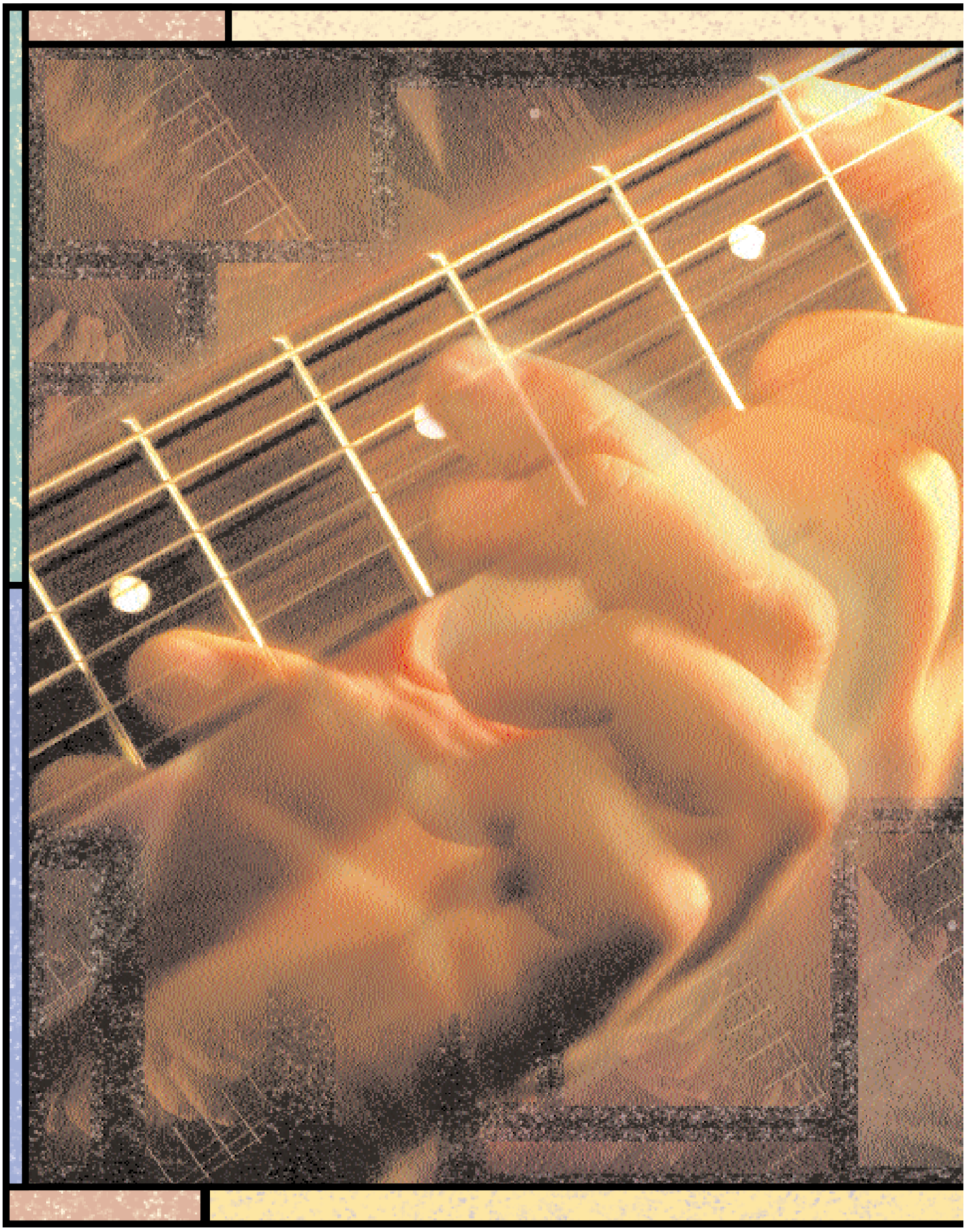

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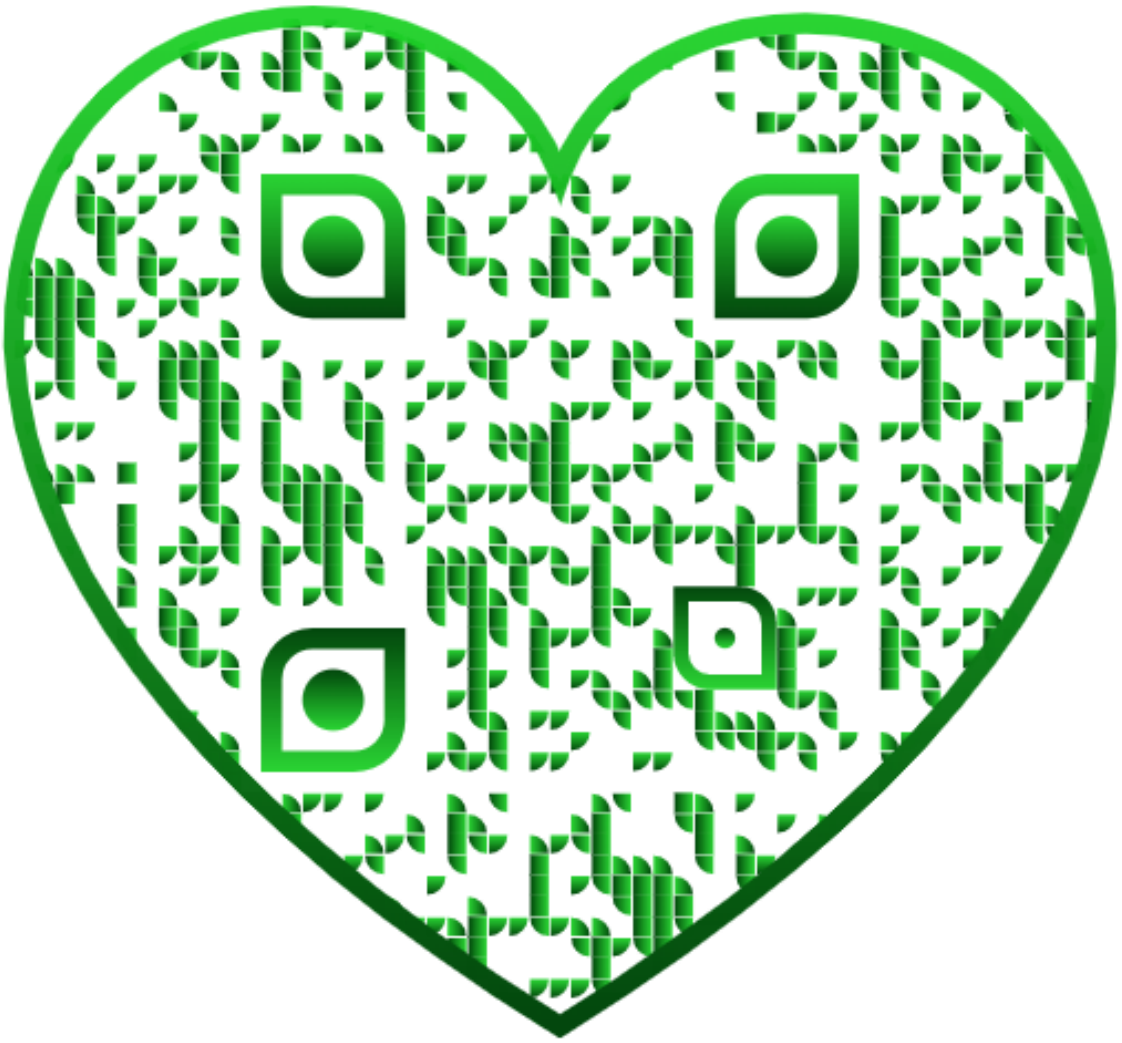
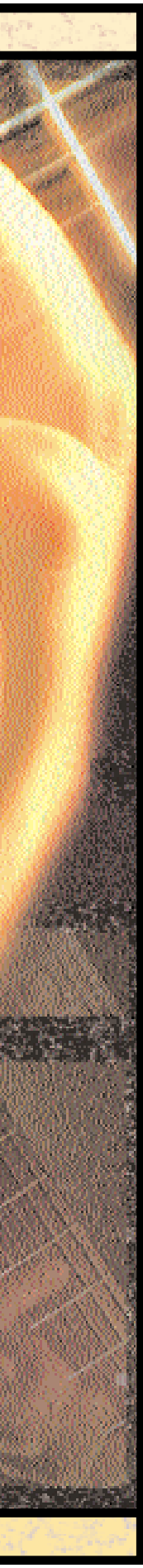




chordless comping

When you hear the words "rhythm guitar," what leaps to mind? Crunchy power chords? Chimey open-string voicings? Perhaps you imagine Freddie Green's three-note swing grips, or Hendrix-inspired hammers and pulls that flow around partial-barre shapes like hot wax in a

PLAY KICK-ASS RHYTHM USING INTERVALS

BY ANDY ELLIS

PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL HAGGARD

"A song needs to breathe."— Stevie Ray Vaughan, Feb. '90, *GP*

chordless comping

lava lamp. These sounds are all cool and essential, yet you can also play dynamite rhythm guitar without fretting a single chord. The secret lies in knowing how to use *intervals* to outline a progression.

In this lesson, we'll explore ways to sketch rich harmony in a variety of styles—funk, blues, country, and jazz—using only intervals. Once you've investigated these examples, you'll have a new way to play *and* hear music.

PREFLIGHT CHECK

First, we need to distinguish between a chord and an interval. A chord contains three or more notes, and an interval comprises two notes. An interval measures the distance—or air gap, as George Van Eps used to say—between two tones. You can play an interval harmonically (both tones at the same time) or melodically (one tone follows the other). In the following examples, we're concerned with the *harmonic* interval—two notes sounded simultaneously.

An interval can't pack the same punch as a bigger voicing—it's a matter of physics. By sacrificing power, however, you gain mobility. Think about it: A five- or six-note chord is clunky—you can't dart around the fretboard with these huge blocks of sound. By contrast, an interval is nimble. Instead of strumming a fixed chunk of tones for one or more measures, you can use intervals to poke and jab at the harmony to create a more adventurous groove.

In practice, you'll find that integrating intervals *and* chords offers the best of both worlds. But for now, let's play a game—just how much music can we make using only two notes at a time?

GOT TO FUNKIFY

Our interval palette consists of 12 half-step possibilities. We use two of these in **Ex. 1**, which alternates between tart major seconds and sweet major sixths, to create a funky groove. Played as written, the riff sounds angular and tight. If you want a grittier vibe, add sixteenth-note string scrapes during some of the rests.

This riff drapes nicely over a *D7*, *D9*, or *D13*, and because it doesn't use open strings, you can transpose it to any key. The secret to moving any riff lies in identifying its root (or, if the riff doesn't contain a root, visualizing its *assumed* root). In this case, the root (*D*) lies on the third string—it's the top note in the insistent major seconds.

As you shift positions, let your 3rd finger glide on the fourth string. *Feel* your way along the fretboard. To play great rhythm guitar, you need to take your eyes off the strings and watch your bandmates instead of your fingers. It's crucial to stay connected to the ebb and flow of the music around you, and you can't do that when you're absorbed with your own movements.

We stay in the same pocket for **Ex. 2**—a sassy call-and-response riff. It contains a major third, two different tritones, a minor sixth, and a fifth.

The nagging tritones are at the heart of this one-bar groove. Beat one contains *C-F#*, our first tritone. The last interval in beat three is the second tritone, *F#-C*. Notice that it's simply an inverson of the first tritone. (To invert an interval, drop the top note an octave, or, conversely, raise the bottom note an octave.) A tritone is the only interval that remains the same when inverted. All other intervals morph into something else. For example, a fourth becomes a fifth, a sixth becomes a third, a second becomes a seventh, and an octave becomes a unison.

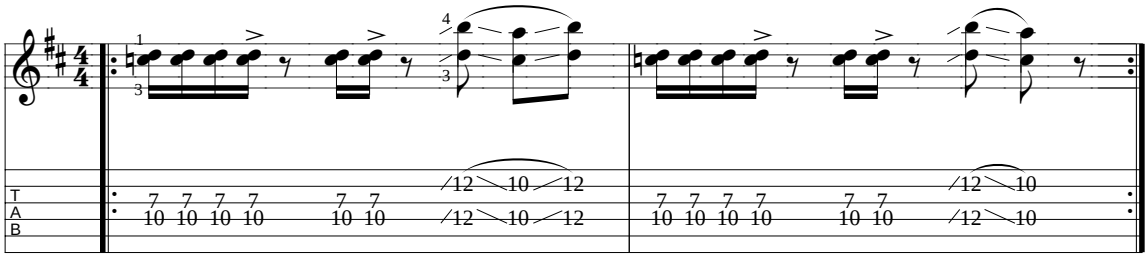
The next time you are jamming over a

Ex. 1

♩ = 76-88

Snappy

D7 (D9, D13)



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TRACKING THE AIR GAP

An interval is the distance in pitch between two notes. We measure this distance in half-steps, as shown in the Common Intervals chart. You'll notice that some intervals have more than one name. Called *enharmonic* intervals, these sound the same, but are named differently according to the musical context. For instance, you may hear the space of six half-steps as a perfect fifth that has been made smaller (diminished), or as a perfect fourth that has been expanded (augmented).

To streamline the list, we've chosen not to show less common enharmonic intervals (such as the diminished third, which is equivalent to a major second, or the diminished octave, which equals a major seventh). Instead, we've stuck to the interval types you'll encounter on a daily basis.

Compound intervals are larger than one octave. To determine the essence of a compound interval, simply subtract seven. A major ninth, for example, is a major second plus an octave (9 - 7 = 2). A minor tenth is a minor third plus an octave (10 - 7 = 3). Compound or not, an interval's quality (major, minor, augmented, or diminished) stays the same.

—AE

COMMON INTERVALS

INTERVAL NAME	HALF-STEPS
unison	0
minor second	1
major second	2
minor third	3
major third	4
perfect fourth	5
augmented fourth	6
tritone	6
diminished fifth	6
perfect fifth	7
augmented fifth	8
minor sixth	8
major sixth	9
minor seventh	10
major seventh	11
octave	12

"I'm a big fan of very fast music."— Shawn Lane, Oct. '92, *GP*

chordless comping

dominant-7th or dominant-9th chord, try our greasy **Ex. 3**. Here, it's notated as a *D7* move, but you'll have no trouble sliding this figure into other keys. It begins with Ex. 1's rhythm grafted to one of Ex. 2's tritones, and ends with a pair of major thirds. The quarter bend in beat four adds a bluesy touch. That last *D* is optional.

Ex. 4 mixes tritones and major seconds into a sparse, yet stinky, groove. With its half-note rest, this lick illustrates the power of silence in rhythm work. It contains all the required tones to send the dominant-7th message—root (*A*), ♭7 (*G*), and 3 (*C♯*)—yet you're only fingering two shapes. The sliding tritones in beat three imply a gospel-inspired IV7-I7 shift. These notes provide harmonic momentum, balancing the static major seconds. This figure moves well along the fretboard, and, because it doesn't crowd the airwaves, it's handy for jams.

HONKY TONK HEAVEN

While we're on the subject of jamming, let's tackle the classic Don Rich comping pattern in **Ex. 5**. This is the single most important groove in honky tonk. It's like a secret handshake—you need to know this twangy riff to step through the clubhouse door.

I've watched great hot-rod Tele pickers—such as Albert Lee, Ray Flacke, and Johnny Hiland—play this lick, and they all barely move their fretting-hand fingers. The key is to roll back and forth between the partial barres played by your 3rd and 1st digits. For authentic snap, you *must* use a hybrid pick-and-fingers grip as notated. Pull the second and third strings up as you pluck them. You'll know you're doing it right when the thirds start to pop.

As shown here, it's a *C7* lick. By all means, ID the third-string root and then start roaming the fretboard. Honky tonk pickers typically use this pattern to comp a I-IV-V progression. Shift positions during the rest (bar 2, beat four).

BLUES GROOVES

The next two patterns come from the soul-blues family. As in the previous riff, **Ex. 6a** uses thirds, but this time we're fretting a mix of minor and major shapes. See how the *D-F♯* interval is first notated with the 3rd finger (beat two), and then with the 1st finger (beat four)? While you can play both intervals with either finger, this shared arrangement facilitates the position shifts—the 3rd finger ascends, the 1st descends.

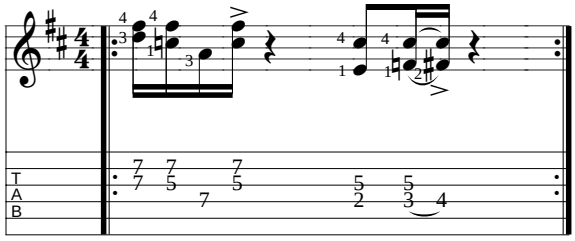
In **Ex. 6b**, we keep the same four notes on the second string (*E, F♯, G, F♯*) and harmonize it with a new line on the fourth string. Though it has the identical melodic contour as Ex. 6a, this new figure "weighs" more because it uses wider intervals—sixths. Use Ex. 6b when you need to

Ex. 2

♩ = 76-88

Sassy

D7 (D9)

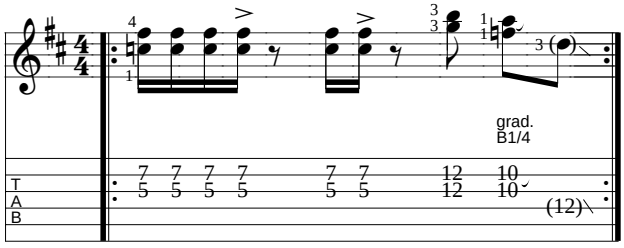


Ex. 3

♩ = 76-88

Greasy

D7 (D9)

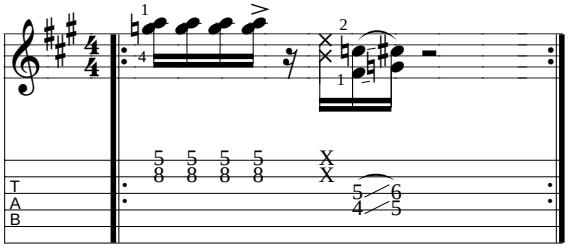


Ex. 4

♩ = 80-88

Punchy

A7 (A9)

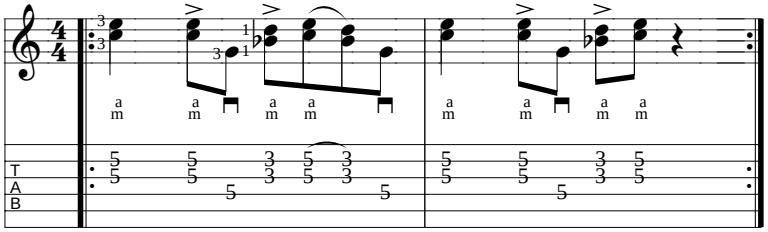


Ex. 5

♩ = 152-176

Twangy

C (C7)

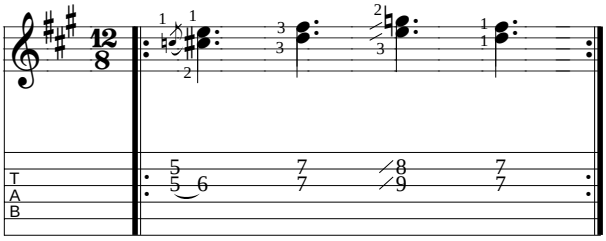


Ex. 6a

♩. = 66-84

w/ tremolo or rotary speaker

A7 (A9)

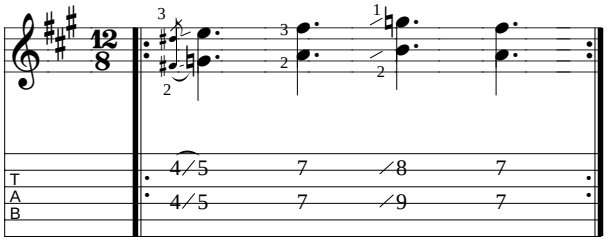


Ex. 6b

♩. = 66-84

w/ flange

A7 (A9)



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"I like to have every note mean something."— Bill Frisell, Apr. '85, *GP*

chordless comping

fill harmonic space. In a large ensemble, the compact Ex. 6a would be more appropriate.

Both patterns are completely mobile. Try using a full dominant-7th barre (root on the sixth string) as a visual anchor. Once you can see these moves in relation to a barre *A7*, try moving up the neck to *D7* and *E7*. Congrats! You now have two flavors of a I7-IV7-V7 blues comping pattern that will work in any key.

DOUBLE YOUR PLEASURE

Master the art of inverting intervals, and you'll have twice as many accompaniment patterns at your disposal. For instance, take **Ex. 7a**—a festive line composed of major and minor thirds. These intervals let you outline a progression—in this case, a I-V-IV-I in the key of *G*—while staying very melodic. As you move through the four chords, listen to the lower voice (it's on the second string).

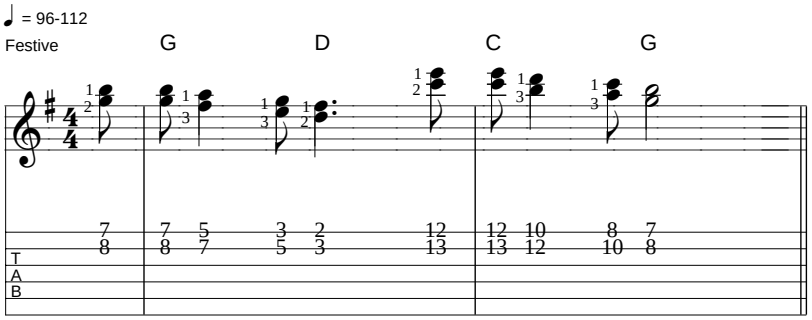
Now, try **Ex. 7b**. Here, we've dropped what was the higher voice down an octave, so now the second-string line is the top voice. As mentioned earlier, when you invert thirds, they become sixths.

Thirds evoke a mariachi band, and sixths emit a country or Memphis R&B vibe. Thirds are compact, sixths are wide, and both sounds are essential to chordless comping.

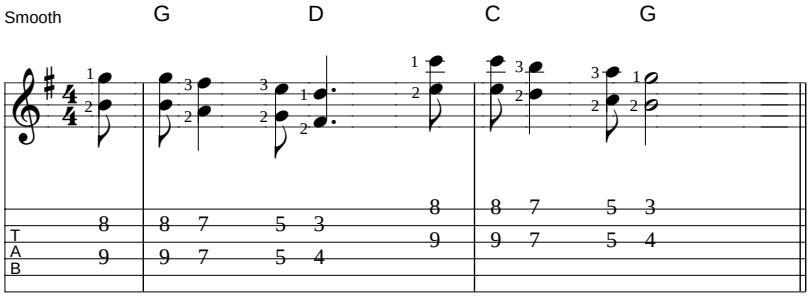
In each phrase, the intervals on beats one and three contain the root and 3 from the chord of the moment. On the other beats, the intervals shift between chord tones and nonchord tones. The latter are piquant passing tones that beg for resolution, while the former reinforce the harmony.

Pay attention to the fretting-hand fingering and notice how one digit stays in contact with the string for the entire passage. In Ex. 7a, it's the 1st finger that functions as a guide, while the 2nd finger assumes this role in Ex. 7b.

Ex. 7a



Ex. 7b



SAMBA AND SOUL

Jazz's mainstay progression is the venerable IIm7-V7-Imaj7. It's easy to sketch this cadence using intervals, as you'll see in **Ex. 8**. Here, we're playing a lively, two-bar samba rhythm during the IIm7-V7 change, but you can mate these intervals with virtually any beat and tempo.

Here's an idea: Move the IIm7-V7 portion through different keys before you finally hit the Imaj7. For example, try back-cycling in fourths through the keys of *A*, *D*, and *G*, using the syncopated samba rhythm and interval shapes shown in Ex. 8.

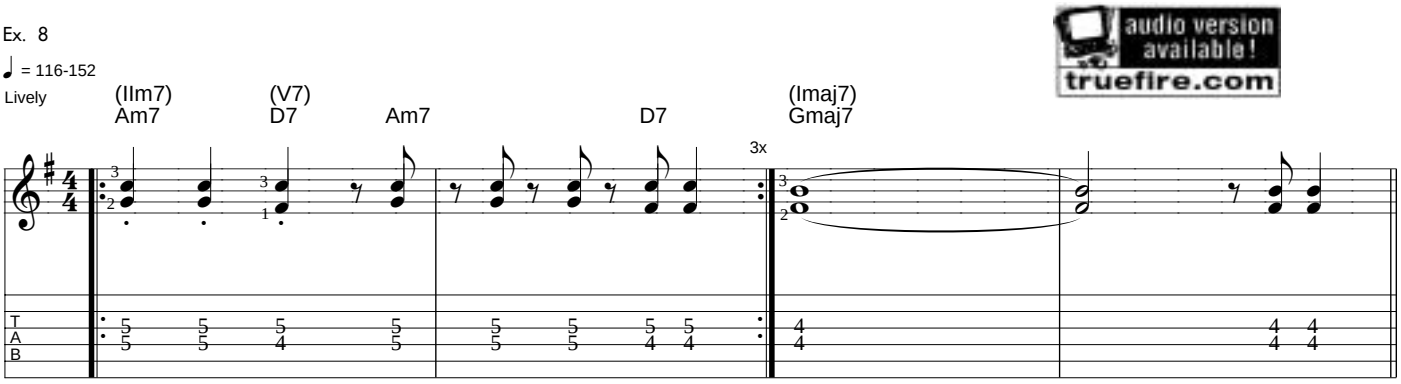
- First, play *Bm7* and *E7* (IIm7 and V7 in the key of *A*) in the seventh and sixth positions.
- Next, move to the twelfth and eleventh positions to play *Em7* and *A7* (IIm7 and V7 in the key of *D*).
- Finally, drop down to the fifth and fourth positions to play Ex. 8's *Am7*, *D7*, and *Gmaj7* figures.

Repeat each IIm7-V7 segment (for a total of four bars) before switching to the next key. If you tape these changes, you'll have a snappy and challenging accompaniment for practicing melodic improvisation. To give yourself ample time to explore these three keys, try tracking the entire back-cycling extravaganza three or four times in a row.

The groove in **Ex. 9a** works equally well for big-band R&B, raunchy Chicago blues, or funky, organ-driven soul-jazz. Give each interval its full value—you want a sustained, legato sound—and let your 2nd finger glide along the fourth string as you shift positions.

Here, we've notated the groove as a compact V7-IV7-I7 change in the key of *A*, corresponding to bars 9, 10, and 11 of a 12-bar blues. It's up to you to unsnap each bar, reconfigure the

Ex. 8



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moves into a full 12-bar progression, and add a turnaround of your choice in bar 12. (Need some turnaround ideas? See "Blues Boomerangs" in the Mar. '00 *GP*.) Once you've done this, be sure to drag these moves into several other keys.

Ex. 9b shows how to finger the same soulful sixths on strings three and five, instead of strings two and four. If you memorize both sets of shapes, you'll have two locations to play this groove in any key. The trick is to visualize the starting chord's assumed root.

• When you're cruising on the second and fourth strings (as in Ex. 9a), the unplayed root lurks on the third string. It's located on the same fret as beat one's two fingered tones.

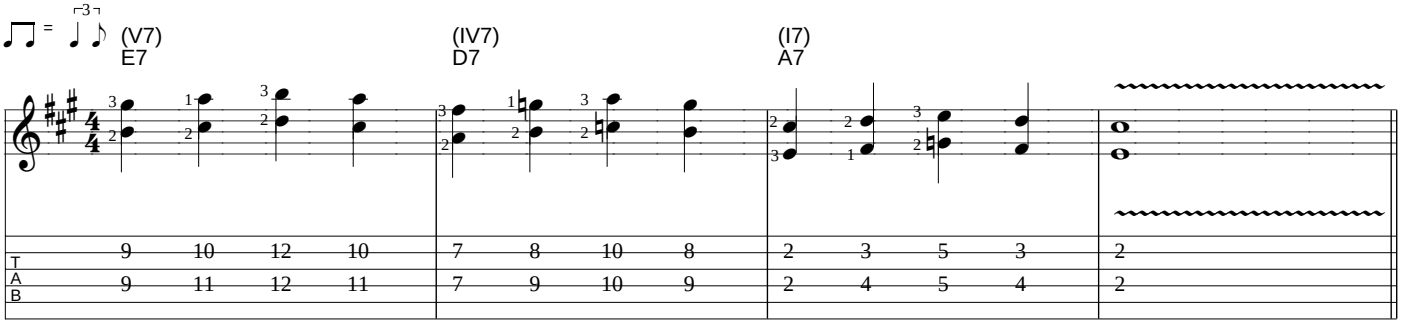
• When you're squeezing the third and fifth strings on beat one (Ex. 9b), the silent root lies on the fourth string, sharing the same fret as the lower voice.

POWER GRIPS AND A BIT O' BO

How would we cope without power chords? The classic power chord is, of course, composed of the root and 5 played on wound strings. But there are other options besides the resulting fifth, as evidenced by **Ex. 10**, which includes fourths and a sixth. The interval changes are subtle, but they add momentum and drama to what would otherwise be a static part. Add some crunchy distortion, palm mute the bass strings, and gradually bring the riff to a boil.

Now let's honor Bo Diddley with—whoa—power seventh chords. **Ex. 11a** shows his namesake beat, the classic "shave 'n' haircut, two bits" rhythm. Typically, you'd pound this out using open-position chords—*A* and *D* or *E* and *A*. Those I-IV changes sound super with the Bo Diddley beat, but as a scratchy alternative, try **Ex. 11b**. With some subtle palm muting, you can choke the strings and turn your guitar into a wiry

Ex. 9a

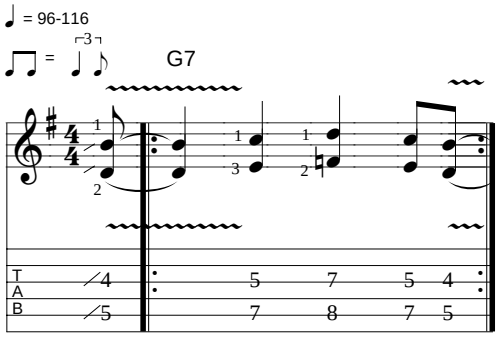


percussion instrument. Add some fast tremolo and you'll have a swampy groove that suggests a dominant-7th chord, yet leaves plenty of room in the higher registers for other instruments or vocals. We're fretting the root and ♭7 of *A7* (*A* and *G*) and *G♯7* (*G♯* and *F♯*).

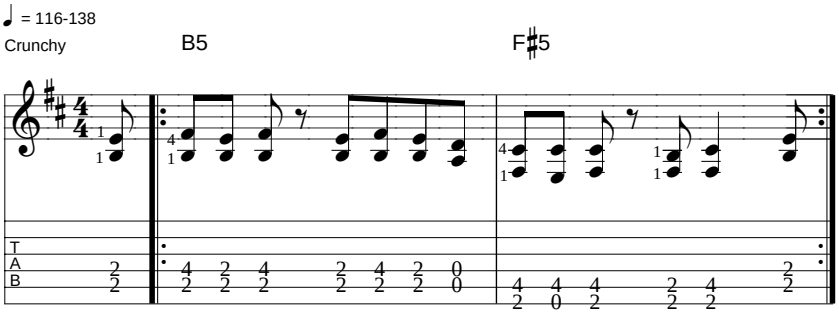
MELODIC RHYTHMS

In **Ex. 12a**, we juggle two lines. Composed of eighth- and sixteenth-notes, the top line is melodic, while the bottom line plays a supporting role and sticks to quarter- and half-notes. Heard together, these lines create a complex series of intervals that range

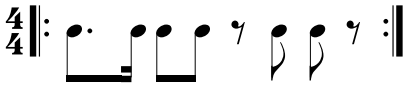
Ex. 9b



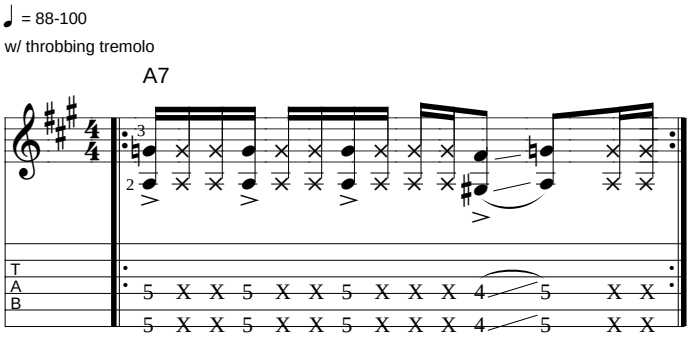
Ex. 10



Ex. 11a



Ex. 11b



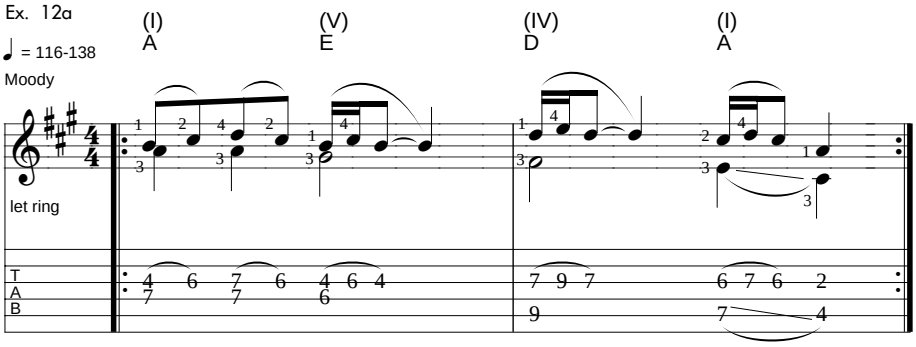
chordless comping

from a major second (*A-B*) to a minor seventh (*F♯-E*). Pop and country ballads often feature this type of ornate melodic rhythm accompaniment over a strummed acoustic background. Try this with a smidge of reverb and some slow, subtle trem. Make sure you sustain the low notes for their full value.

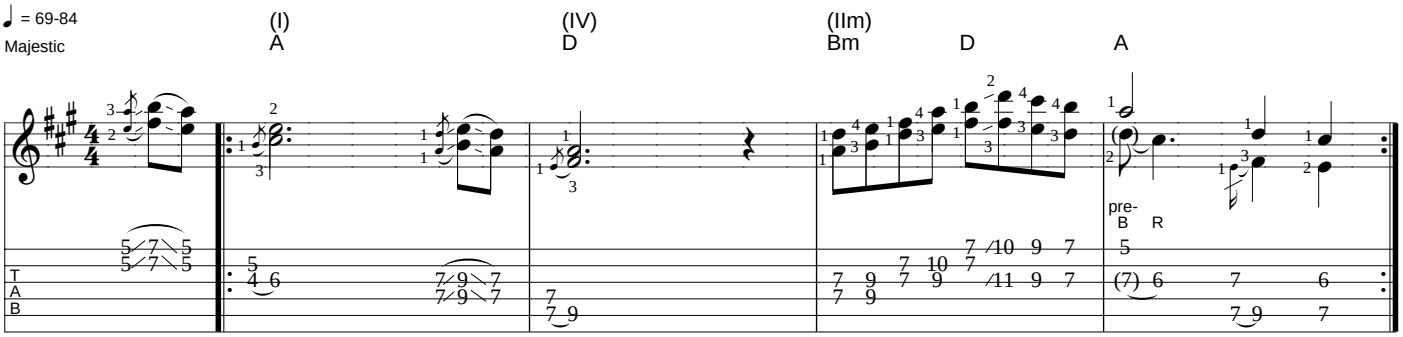
Ex. 12b features the stirring sound of sliding fourths and the lonesome twang of fourths hammered into thirds. The surprise comes in bar 3, where you ascend using a mix of intervals: perfect fourths, major sixths, a major third, and a minor sixth.

Bar 4 features a bona fide pedal steel lick. To nail the first half, you need to set up a perfect fifth prebend, and then relax back to a minor sixth shape. A steeler would use a pedal to change the minor seventh (*E-D*) in beat three

Ex. 12a



Ex. 12b



to a minor sixth (*F♯-D*), but on the 6-string, a gentle hammer does the trick.

CUTTING THE CHORD

As we've seen in these examples, rhythm parts composed of intervals can be graceful or gnarly, tangy or sweet. Ironically, the more you learn about constructing chords, the easier it is to comp without them. Once you adopt a "sans chord" mindset, you'll start hearing harmony in a new way. Small horn sections are a good source of inspiration, as are vocal duets. Perhaps the most compelling feature of the guitar is its ability to express both singing melodies and big, chiming harmony (pianos don't sing, and saxes can't comp). Chordless comping splits the difference between these two musical extremes and puts a third option at your fingertips.